

News Release



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California State Parks Expands Recovery Effort for Western Snowy Plover

The California Department of Parks and Recreation is asking for public cooperation as it begins implementing new policies and restrictions on state beaches as part of an expanding effort to protect the western snowy plover, a tiny bird listed as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

Some measures will result in additional restrictions on visitor use in areas that provide important plover habitat, particularly nesting areas. This includes enforcement of existing regulations prohibiting dogs on state beaches. The new rules do not prohibit leashed dogs in campgrounds, picnic areas, parking areas and roads, where dogs are allowed under state regulations.

The Department will limit disruption of public use as much as possible, but at the same time maximize its protective efforts for the threatened shorebird.

"Our California State Parks system includes more than 280 miles of California coastline, and a large portion of coastal habitat used by the western snowy plover, so we play a key role in the protection and recovery of this species," said Ruth Coleman, acting director of California State Parks.

"We believe these new measures will further that cause, and we believe visitors to our parks will understand the necessity and join with us in striving to make this effort a success," she said.

The western snowy plover is a sparrow-sized, pale-colored shorebird that breeds along the Pacific Coast from southern Washington to southern Baja California, Mexico. The coastal population of the bird is listed by the federal government as threatened due to a serious decline in breeding numbers, mainly as a result of loss of suitable habitat and disturbance by people.

State Parks' new policies and restrictions are part of a systemwide management program developed following a report by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that identified 62 locations in California with specific goals for breeding bird numbers. Forty-four of those locations included some State Park property.

The Department has been implementing site protection and enforcement at many plover nesting areas for years. However, more areas will be afforded protection by the expanded effort set forth in the new management program.

Snowy plovers nest on open, sandy beaches along much of the coastline from early spring to mid-fall. State Beaches provide essential nesting habitat for plovers, and at a time of the year that typically coincides with highest visitor use. Because of this, proper stewardship and protection of nesting areas on State Beaches by California State Parks is vital to the recovery of the species.

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The Department's expanded recovery effort includes the prohibition of both leashed and unleashed dogs from snowy plover nesting habitat. Dogs are prohibited on all State Park beaches unless specifically authorized in a particular area. Prior authorizations in areas that provide important plover habitat will be rescinded. Enforcement will be increased in areas where dog use has occurred in the past without specific authorization. The new rules do not prohibit leashed dogs in campgrounds, picnic areas, parking areas and roads.

The new protection measures will affect equestrian use in some coastal beaches, especially in areas where plover nesting occurs. Important habitat areas will be closed to equestrian use and access routes near sensitive areas may be restricted. There also will be restrictions on activities that may disturb nesting birds, such as kite flying, hang-gliding, camping and beach fires. Fireworks will continue to be prohibited on all State Beaches.

Western snowy plover nesting areas in the State Park system are being monitored and a variety of measures are being implemented to protect nests, eggs and chicks. Plover nests and eggs are well camouflaged, making it easy for beach visitors to inadvertently disturb or destroy nests and eggs. Protection measures include erecting temporary informational and warning signs near nest sites, alerting beach goers to the sensitive nature of the area, fencing or roping off nesting areas and, in some cases, closing portions of the beach area. In most cases, only that portion of the dry sand, dune-nesting habitat above high-tide line will be posted as closed to visitor use.

In locations where the Department's management efforts represent a change from past practices, State Park rangers will explain the new restrictions and policies to coastal park visitors before implementing a new zero-tolerance approach for violations of these policies and restrictions.

In addition to increasing site protection and enforcement of existing regulations, State Parks will increase educational efforts to inform visitors of the precarious status of plovers and of the importance of actions aimed at recovering viable plover populations. Visitors will be asked to help through a variety of steps, including staying out of restricted nesting areas and leaving driftwood on the beaches to serve as habitat. Color brochures have been developed for distribution at coastal parks.

The Department's efforts to protect western snowy plover nesting areas and restore coastal habitat in general date back more than 25 years. In the early 1980s, the Department began monitoring plover nesting areas along beaches in the Monterey Bay in cooperation with the Point Reyes Bird Observatory.

In 1990, the Department worked with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in fencing off nesting areas in Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area in San Luis Obispo County and in the Monterey Bay area to protect the birds from predators. Since then, the monitoring and protection efforts by the Department have expanded systemwide and now represent a major component of the recovery effort for western snowy plover in the State.

In the last three years, the Department's plover recovery program has included a number of projects in more than 20 individual state parks and districts, from Humboldt County to San Diego County. Projects include marsh restoration, exotic plant control, estuary restoration, plant community restoration, construction of barriers and monitoring of snowy plover populations.

The Department has made significant efforts toward snowy plover recovery at Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area. Roughly half of the acreage at Oceano Dunes now is restricted to off-road recreation to help protect plover nesting areas. The Department continues to monitor and manage the breeding season of both the western snowy plover and the California least tern at Oceano Dunes. During the current year, the program includes banding birds, managing predators and construction of a fence around a 160-acre nesting area.

(Media Note: For information on how protection measures may affect specific State Beaches, please contact the regional State Park district office or park unit.)